

MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT



Office of Public Information

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CONSTITUTION WEEK ANNOUNCED BY MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT State high court offers events, resources for teachers and students to fulfill federally-mandated educational requirement

LANSING, MI, September 16, 2011 – Educators looking for ways to observe [Constitution Day](#) with their students can turn to the [Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center](#) for help.

Federal law requires that all schools that receive public funding must teach about the U.S. Constitution on or near September 17, the date the Constitution was signed in 1787.

Resources provided by the Learning Center include an online video discussion by Chief Justice Robert P. Young, Jr., about the U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* decision, which established the "separate but equal" doctrine, providing legal support for decades of racial segregation. *Plessy* was overturned in 1954 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v Board of Education*.

The catalyst for *Plessy* was an attempt by Homer Adolph Plessy, a 30-year-old shoemaker who was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black, to sit in a whites-only train car after buying a first-class ticket on a Louisiana railroad. He was prosecuted under Louisiana's Separate Car Act, which provided that "all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this state, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races ..." The penalty for sitting in the wrong compartment was a \$25 fine or 20 days in jail. Plessy challenged the Separate Car Act under the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, but a majority of the Supreme Court upheld the law. Justice Henry Billings Brown, writing for the majority, said that "[I]n the nature of things, [the Fourteenth Amendment] could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either."

In the video, Chief Justice Young analyzes *Plessy* and how the majority's decision violated constitutional principles. The video, which was produced in cooperation with Michigan Government Television, can be seen at <http://www.mgtv.org/video/interviews/>. For more information about *Plessy v Ferguson* and its impact on American life, visit "Landmark Cases of the U.S. Supreme Court," a project of the Supreme Court Historical Society and the nonprofit Street Law, Inc., at <http://www.streetlaw.org/en/landmark.aspx>.

The Michigan Supreme Court has declared September 16 – September 22 to be U.S. Constitution Week in Michigan. In a [resolution](#), signed by the seven justices, the Court said it was marking the observance "in gratitude for the Constitution and our system of ordered liberty that it makes possible."

The Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center will also mark Constitution Day with visits from elementary and high school students on Tuesday, September 20. Fourth-grade students from Ojibwa Elementary School in Macomb Township will re-enact the signing of the Constitution, based on the famous 1940 [painting](#) by Howard Chandler Christy.

The Learning Center offers many free educational materials for educators and students, including an e-newsletter, *Justitia*. For more information, visit <http://courts.michigan.gov/plc/>.

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